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ABSTRACT

Disparities between Whites and African Americans exist in many areas in U.S. society. These disparities are exacerbated by social ills, including the Persian Gulf conflict. Positive change on the part of African American educators is required to combat these problems. The following four postulates for teaching African American youth are provided: (1) develop as a holistic person via African American culture; (2) be a positive role model for African American youth; (3) use effective classroom and administrative practices in order for African American youth to learn; and (4) make a commitment to two human service and two professional organizations. To go forward as a people, African Americans must look to the past and the nurturing provided for the current generation of adults, the accomplishments of African Americans must be recognized in curricula for African American students, educators must look for inspiration to people of color who have achieved, and educators and students must look to their African heritage. (SLD)

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WHO WILL TEACH AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH?

by

DR. WALI GILL

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A speech delivered at the 21st Annual Conference of the Metropolitan Detroit Alliance of Black School Educators Lansing, Michigan, Saturday, March 16, 1991

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WHO WILL TEACH AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

As-Salaam-Alaikum...May Peace be with you...Good Afternoon.

"It takes an entire village to raise a child"
African Proverb

Many aspects of the educational reform movement in the United States --just as with the case of the Persian Gulf War-- distract from the basic issues which confront people of color in this country. That basic issue, to me, is "How can the educational process provide an equitable system for the education of non-white students and especially youth descended from Africa?" Concerned and caring educators must look at societal conditions and than shred away those distractions that keep real teachers from exercising proper leadership for the 21st century. Then we can answer the question, "Who will teach African American youth?"

Using a Native American process, persons of European descent have established a system of government that has the potential of being the most dynamic and most progressive of all civilizations. The Iroquois Indians had the first democratic body in this country and it was also the first to recognize women's rights. Many of the Iroquois League governmental ideas were incorporated in Benjamin Franklin's Albany Plan of the Union for the colonies. Twenty years later, the plan was essentially followed in the Articles of Confederation, the forerunner of the U. S. Constitution. It was a good beginning but as Langston Hughes once noted, "This country has yet to become what it should become."

This afternoon I would like to make some comments on the war in the Gulf and U. S. society, diaparities which exist between

African Americans and European Americans (white-Americans), and how we as persons of African descent and as educators can help bring about positive change for the growth and survival of African American youth. I will touch upon the interwoveness of human rights, the economy, health, employment and education, and its impact on African American populations in this country. An emphasis will be on African American males since our presence on this continent has spawned racism.

THE WAR AND SOCIETY. War has always been a trademark of this country and a cornerstone of U. S. policy. In recent years, this country has been involved in several questionable military-conflicts and contradictions. There was the arming of the Contras to achieve U. S. goals in Nicaragua; the amphibious assault on the country of Grenada; the U. S. bombing of Libya on the assumption that Moammar Gadhafi had ordered acts of terriorism in West Germany; and the invasion of Panama in which U. S. troops killed four times more civilians than Panamian soldiers and 26 U. S. citizens.

The United States did not support several United Nations Security Council resolutions critical of the invasion of several countries. The U. S. did not opppose the attack of Israel on Lebanon, nor voice opposition when South Africa invaded Namibia, Angola and Mozambique. Yet the Education President felt it necessary to lecture Nelson Mandela last year on violence. Now mind you, this comes from the president of the United States, a country in which a firearm was used in 75 percent of all killings last

year, and a country that can't even ban assault rifles from its streets.

You will recall, also, the help the U. S. government gave Iraq when Iran was the enemy and how Saddam Hussain was ignored when he gassed Kurdish rebels in his country. The decision to invade Iraq was made before, and not after, the 1990 November elections. The deployment of 400,000 troops, a force larger than the number of U. S. troops who invaded Europe against Hitler in World War II, seemed excessive when there were other options available.

The recession, the Savings and Loan bailouts, the bullish markets on Wall Street as a result of defense contracts reflect --to some degree-- a preoccupation for a comfortable lifestyle by European-Americans. After the invasion of Iraq, there was a micaculous rebound of the oil market. Be mindful that the United States, which has 5 percent of the world's population, uses 26 percent of the world's petroleum. As Mary Frances Berry remarked recently, "Not blood for oil, but blood for cheaper oil." And the so-called volunteer-Army had no other choice when education, developing a skill and employment are scarce.

The country was manipulated and drawn into the war which was then romanticized by the media. In the process the human factors were negated. African Americans, for example, who comprise approximately 12 percent of the population, were represented at 30 percent during the height of Operation Desert Storm. From the Revolutionary War to the Persian Gulf, men --and here of late women-- of African descent have participated. After each crisis,

African Americans have returned home to find their conditions the same, if not worse.

(MENDACITY)

STATISTICS AND DISPARITIES. The life expectancy for all racial and gender groups in the United States is up except for that of African Americans males. According to both the National Center for Health Statistics and The Institute for Advanced Study of Black Life, African American men suffer high death rates from heart disease (69 percent higher than the general population), strokes (90 percent higher), cancer (71 percent higher), liver ailments (126 percent higher), and diabetes (86 percent higher). Perhaps most alarming, African American males account for one in four AIDS cases nationwide.

Homicide for African American men, ages 15 to 24, is the leading cause of death, and one of every three men, ages 20 to 24, is a homicide victim. African American men in Harlem are less likely to reach 40 than young men in Bangladash, one of the poorest and most overcrowded countries in the world. In 1987, Michigan was the most dangerous state for African American men while North Carolina and Kentucky were considered the safest. Homicide is a large and important health problem according to Dr. James Mercy of the Centers for Disease Control and is now so classified.

The Sentencing Project, a non-profit research organization, reported the U. S. imprisons a larger share of its population than any other nation, followed by South Africa. The incarceration rate for African Americans is 3109 per 100,000 residents, or

approximately seven times that of all other U. S. residents. The incarceration rate for black South Africans is 729 per 100,000, or approximately twice that of white South Africans. According to the Department of Justice crime data reports, one of every four African American men are in jail or under court supevision. In fact, there are more men in their 20s under court control than there are African American men enrolled in college. Many of these court-controlled men have drug related cases and involvement. In 1986 half of the prison population was African American and of all inmates, 62 percent had less than a 12th grade education.

A huge disparity remains between African Americans and white Americans, with the latter enjoying 2.2 times the employment rate according to the Urban League's The State of Black America report. There has been a decline in real income of African American males between the ages of 20 and 29 of 27.7 percent, compared to 17.8 percent decline for all men according to Northwestern University's Center for Labor Market Studies. One out of three African American lives at or below the poverty level, and Africam American children under 18 are represented at 45.6 percent according to a report issued by The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Almost six of ten African American families are headed by a single parent, many women.

According to the Joint Center for Political Studies, African Americans in public schools remain "largely isolated" and receive an inferior education, despite federal and state efforts to provide equal opportunities. For example, across the country, school

districts report that African American males are disproportionately underachievers in reading and mathematics. The National Council of Advocates has reported severe disparities between African American students and whites classified as educable mentally retarded or slow learners versus talented or gifted. There is also disparity in the number of African American suspensions when compared to white students.

Many of the seemingly dyfunctional behaviors of African Americans in general society are established before they enter school and in formal school settings. That is, some equations can be made between the success of African Americans in U. S. society, programs and curriculums, learning styles, and African American socializations in traditional school settings. As a result, we will not fare much better in general society than we fare in traditional school settings. And we African American males, as always, have been the most vulnerable to the Euro-American process.

(CAN'T YOU SEE WHAT'S HAPPENING?)

POSITIVE CHANGE. Unless there is positive change on the part of African American educators, we will continue to fail as a community. We must restore community spirit and pride and a sense of community. Do you remember when we learned from each other when it was just us? Do you remember when there were all boys and all girls schools? Do you remeber how often you came home and told your mother the teacher had to discipline you? Do you remember when white people thought all of us knew each other? And do you remember when your teacher told you that you had to work twice as hard as

white people and be a credit to your race? I do. That's the spirit we as educators must restore, not individually, but collectively through our connectedness to one another.

I have four postulates (assumptions without proof, to propose as self-evident) for us in order to teach African American youth. First, develop as a holistic person via African American culture. Second, be a positive role model for African American youth. Third, employ effective classroom and administrative practices in order for African American youth to learn. Finally, for the growth and survival of African American youth, make a commitment to two human service organizations and two professional organizations. I want to spend some time with each of these this afternoon.

1. Developing as a holistic person via African American culture. We should turn --to some degree--to the past. Alain Locke's anthology The New Negro, published in 1925, suggested that art might provide a liberating force to the race problem. Dr. Locke had been a Phi Beta Kappa at Harvard, a Rhodes scholar at Oxford and had studied at the University of Berlin before establishing the philosophy department at Howard University. Dr. Locke stressed to African American artists of post World War I America that whites were not really paying attention and that the time had come for African Americans to cease propagandizing and reach into themselves to express their suffering through art rather tham pamphleteering.

Now I am not suggesting that you become artists. But I am suggesting that you tap into the rich cultural expression of the African American arts for self identity and furfillment. I often

tell my students, "You do not know a culture unless you know its art." When I speak of the arts, I am referring to the literature, drama, music, dance, painting and sculpture of a people. As a result of the Eurocentric curriculum, we are familar with the art of Europe, and as a result know a great deal about the development of the Euro-American process. The artists are the change agents of society for life imitates art and negates people imitating the media.

The Harlem Renaissance was officially ushered in with the publication of a book of poems Harlem Shadows by Claude McKay in 1922. One of the poems reads, in part:

> "If we must die, let it not be like hogs
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
> While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
> Making their mock at our accursed lot.
> If we must die, O let us nobly die."

During this period W.E.B. DuBois published Darkwater and The Gift of Black Folk; James Weldon Johnson wrote Book of American Negro Poetry; Georgia Douglass wrote Bronze; Countee Cullen penned Color; Jessie Fauset produced There is Confusion; McKay wrote Home to Harlem; and Langston Hughes published The Weary Blues amongst many more. The Schomburg Collection, an important research center, was established in Harlem as part of the New York Public Library. But don't be preoccupied with the products of the period; it was the process of the period that was all important.

Although the Harlem Renaissance was primarily a literary period, there were plenty of plays: The Emperor Jones, In Abraham's Bosom, Porgy, All God's Chillun Got Wings, Shuffle Along, Hot

Chocolates; robust African American-originated dances, the Charleston and the Lindy Hop; painters Aaron Douglas, William H. Johnson, Hale Woodruff, Sargent Johnson, cartoonist E. Simms Campbell; and photograher extraordinnaire, James Van Derzee. The period was a launching pad for Paul Robeson, Duke Ellington, Bill Robinson, Marion Anderson, Roland Hayes and countless others. But again, it was the process that enabled African Americans to reach a "spiritual coming of age."

The dynamic energy of the 1960s was but a carbon copy of the Harlem Renaissance. A cultural energy needs to be regenerated with African American youth in order to better prepare them for the 21st century. I firmly believe it is the absence of African American culture, history and moral values that is contributing to a less than favorable growth and survival rate among our children and our youth and especially our males. We --as educators-- must develop holistically as individuals. Which brings me to...

2. Be a positive role model for African American youth. One of the best ways to be a role model is to have a role model. Langston Hughes is one of mine.

It is the immortality of Langston Hughes that has charted my course. One poem in particular is the summation of the effort and the faith that persons of African descent must ascribe to in order to survive and grow in this country. That poem is "Mother to Son," and I equate "mother" to any African American who has achieved anything more than another African American --"the son."

Well son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's had tacks in it,
And splinters
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor--
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy don't you turn back
Don't you set down on the steps
"Cause you finds its kinda hard.
Don't you fall now--
For I'se still goin' honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Regardless of the level of economic status --and it does not matter that one of every three of us is at or below the poverty level, it does not matter that only 47,000 African American families are earning $100,000 or more --we all can turn around and say to someone, "So boy don't you turn back, Don't you sit down on the steps." For African Americans in this country, life ain't been no crystal stair.

Now it is good to have historical role models, but they <u>have</u> passed on. It is preferable to have role models you read about who are currently on the scene. But you don't know them either. The only real role models anyone can have are people you can actually see and touch and hold and be held by. As Bill Cosby has said to some young audiences (paraphrasing), "How can entertainers and athletes be your role models? You don't even know those people. It's the people who are in a position to take care of you day by day who serve as your real role models."

Our impact will be felt more outside of the classroom --as

role models-- than inside the classroom. Those times when we least suspect we are being observed, we cast the longest shadow. As an example: Think of the manner in which very young children seemed to be totally engaged in play but are very conscious of the adult behaviors around them. Two African proverbs come to mind: "What a child says he has heard at home," and "A boy learns to walk in the shadow of his father."

(THE PREACHER AND HIS SON)

3. Employ effective classroom and administrative practices in order for African American youth to learn. Dr. Robert Branch of Syracuse University says that "Educators at all levels and in all types of instruction face a significant challenge in preparing increasingly culturally and ethnically diverse students to take their place in an ever-changing international marketplace.

In less than ten years, 80 percent of all new members of the work force will be non-white and female. By the year 2010, there will be almost 63 million school-age children in the United States, of which 38 percent will be non-white. By then, more than half of all students will live in nine states: California, Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Michigan and Ohio. Non-white students already constitute a majority of students in 23 of the 25 largest school districts. And California is the first state to have a majority of its citizens classified as non-white, led by Hispanics, the fastest growing non-white population.

Concerned and caring educators must examine the relevant and selected use of Euro-centric and Afro-centric curriculums, relevant

instructional strategies, the benefits of vocational education, the creation of alternative high schools for African American and Hispanic males, all-male African American classrooms, and programs which support the continuing education of females. Administrators must design creative approaches in attaching new teachers to the profession. California and Florida, for example, have signed agreements with different branches of the armed services under which college-educated service personnel retiring from the military will be recruited as classroom teachers.

In the meanwhile, the Euro-centric curriculum must be footnoted. There is no part of the curriculum where a person of African descent has not made a significant contribution to the field or to human process and development. We are going to play a game. I will call off some inventions (all recorded with the U.S. Patent Office) made by African Americans. I want you to place as many as possible in your curriculum area, in engineering, in vocational education and think of the possibilities for interdisciplinary studies (which means working with another teacher). Keep in mind how much manual labor we have done in this country. Many of these inventions reflect "working smarter, and not harder."

Here we go: an arm for recording machine, an improvement in sugar making, the clothes dryer, the cap for bottles and jars, a breathing device (gas mask), the straightening comb, the swing chair, the steam table, the fountain pen, the traffic signal, the guitar, the letter box, the riding saddle, the briddle-bit, the

golf tee, the lawn sprinkler, the railway-telegraphy, a railway relay-instruument, the fire extinguisher, the folding bed, the curtain rod support, the elevator, the pencil sharpner, the ironing board, the egg beater, the hand stamp, the refrigerator, the overshoe, a shoe attaching machine, the postmarking and cancelling machine, the bicycle frame, the child's carriage, the horseshoe, the lawn mower, the heating furnace, the dust pan, and the mop. The mop was the braincild of Thomas W. Stewart of Detroit (June 13, 1893 Pat No. 499-402). You have to footnote that curriculum.

How about Benjamin Banneker, a self-taught mathematician, an outstanding astronomer, author of almanacs, surveyor, humanitarian who made the first wooden clock. Or Canadian-born Elijah McCoy, whose engineering feats were responsible for the phrase "the real McCoy;" George Washington Carver, who started out as an art and music major, and developed over 300 products that could be made from the oils, proteins, and chemicals from peanuts; Selma Burke, who designed the mold used for the FDR dime. And we have yet to go to Europe: Beethoven, who was called "The Black Spaniard," in his day; Alexandre Dumas, a clerk who produced 40 plays in fifteen years before writing <u>The Three Musketeers</u> and <u>The Count of Monte Cristo</u>; and Alexander Pushkin, a descendent of Hannibal who became the father of modern Russian literature. Need I go on? Yes!

That's not the tip of the iceberg --that's just <u>part</u> of the pyramid, and of course you know where they were built. Scholars of the Nile Valley Movement are bringing to academic debate not only the contributions of Egyptian civilization to Greek civilization,

but the influence of Southern Egypt and Nubia. Dr. Asa Hilliard says the reason the Nile Valley Movement "has not been properly told is that because of slavery, colonization, racism and apartheid, it was necessary to create new images of Africans to justify the oppression."

There are learning styles and classroom strategies which lend themselves more favorably to the learning processes of African American youngsters. Classroom teachers are trained in left-brain/right brain learning styles. They are also famailar with teacher-centered, discovery approaches and changed-structure methodologies. The present Euro-centric curriculum is designed to favor left brain students who process information in a logical, sequential, linear, judgemental fashion. Recent research indicates that most non-white students are whole concept learners and process information in an abstract, non-sequencial, non-linear style. Non-white students also appear to be more comfortable in changed-structure environments, that is engaged in group investigation, small group activity, role playing, simulation and on-site learning experiences. It is the all-at-onceness of learning.

(CHINESE PROVERB: I HEAR/FORGET, I SEE/REMEMBER, I DO/UNDERSTAND)

Vocational education has --thus far-- been an afterthought in the educational reform movement. It should not be. Entirely too much attention has been placed on SAT, PSAT, CAT and other scores and not enough on helping non-white students, at-risk and female students --the work force of the 21st century. Congress has provided some of the resources needed to draw vocational education

into the mainstream which may reform the whole of American education.

The Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act Amendments of 1990 has two main purposes: (1) to integrate academic and vocational training by using the context of job-skills training to enhance students' academic skills and to motivate them to excel in both academic and vocational courses and (2) to provide economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, students with limited proficiency in English, and females enrolled in non-traditional programs the necessary services in order to ensure their participation in such programs.

Other non-traditional programs, such as Milwaukee's two African American Immersion Academies, New York's Ujamaa (familyhood) Institute for African American and Hispanic males, all scheduled to open in September; and similar programs which have been created in Baltimore, Minneapolis and Detroit must be given a chance to succeed, along with Project 2000 which operates out of CEAAM (Center for Educating African American Males) at my alma mater, Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland.

4. Make a committment to two human service and two professional organizations. There is no need to spend very much time on this postulate although a four membership minimum for professionals seems less than adequate. I also believe everyone should hold a membership in the NAACP and the Association for the Study for Afro-American Life and History. These organizations have long carried the banner for improved civil rights for people of

color and for the importance of knowing who we are and where we belong. From an economic and professional perspective, I sincerely hope that African American organizations will begin to hold national conferences at our colleges and universities, especially during the summer months when dormitory space is more readily available.

Practicing a religion won't hurt, especially if you have similar beliefs and are compatible with a group of people. I said religion --not dominations. Religion as in Judism, Christianity or Islam, the religions of Abraham; Buddism, which has the largest membership; the Baha'i Faith, the world's newest religion, and there are others. We, as African Americans, spend time with three traditional institutions in which we take care of ourselves and there is little competition --the barber shop, the beauty shop and the undertaker. It's good to spend time in the former two, for there are great information-sharing and socializing opportunities, before we have to spend time at the third.

Brothers and sisters, in closing I ask, "Who <u>will</u> teach African American youth?" In order to go forward as a people we must make a better effort and do a better job of providing for our young people. In order to go forward we must look to the past, and to the nuturing that our parents and grandparents provided for us, for in <u>that</u>, is a legacy. In order to go forward, we must look for inspiration to those persons of color who have served. As Martin Luther King Jr., once said, "We all can be great because we all have the capacity to serve." In order to go forward we must look

to the motherland which provided the spirit and energy for humankind --Africa, the cradle of civilization. For Africa is all the help we need.

Africa is all the help we need,
She does our ever hunger feed,
She walks beside us, guides our way,
Through every moment, every day.

We now are wise, we now are true,
Faithful, kind and loving too,
All things we are, can do and be,
For Africa lives in you and me.

Africa is our health, we can't be sick,
Africa is our strength, unfailing quick,
Africa is our all, we should have no fear,
For Peace and Love and Africa is here.

THANK YOU. GOD BLESS YOU. MAY PEACE BE WITH YOU.